



# Back In THE BRONX

CELEBRATING THE EXPERIENCE OF GROWING UP AND LIVING IN THE BRONX

## He Knew From Shinola

By Jeff Gilbert MD, driftymaster@aol.com



835 Walton Avenue



My best friend Butch and I lived in **835 Walton Avenue**, on the northwest corner of **158<sup>th</sup> Street** between

approach to earning money. We decided to skip going to the game for a few weeks and use the saved money to buy a shoeshine kit from the **Tru-Form Shoe Store**. Our plan was to set up in front of the **Yankee Tavern** on the corner of **161<sup>st</sup> Street** and **Gerard Avenue** and shine shoes.



Gerard Avenue view (arrow pointing to author's window)

**Walton and Gerard Avenues**. Butch, his sister, grandmother, and parents were in Apartment 51, while my two sisters, parents, and I were in Apartment 28.

It was the spring of 1961, I was 9 (soon to be 10) years old, and we would scour the neighborhood for empty glass soda bottles, 2 cents for the small ones and 5 cents for the large. Walking down **Walton** and up **Gerard**, looking under cars, in large wire garbage pails, in the bushes of **Franz Sigel Park**, and in the alleys, finding \$1.50 worth of bottles was no easy task. We needed the money to buy seventy-five cent bleacher tickets to watch the Yankees play in the **Stadium**.

After doing this through April and May, we needed to come up with an easier and more lucrative

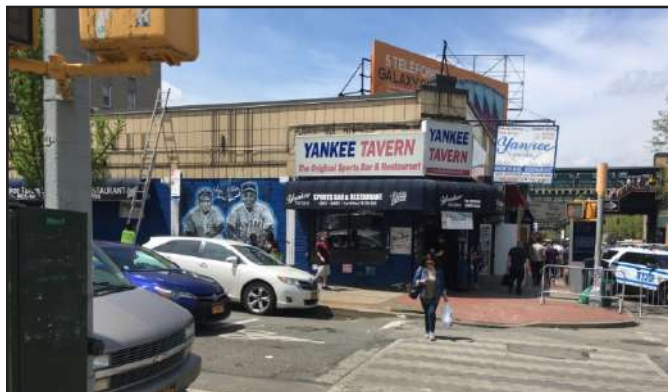
It was a warm and sunny Saturday morning in early June, and the Yanks would be playing the KCA's at 2pm. I took one of our kitchen chairs (my mother was not too happy about that) and carried it across and up **Gerard Avenue** to our new business location.

An early fan, wearing scuffed black shoes, sat down and asked, "How much to shine 'em up?"

Butch answered, "Twenty-five cents a shine." And we had our first customer.

I brushed the shoes,

I brushed the shoes,



Yankee Tavern (sewer on corner has been removed)

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# From The Editors . . .



Clinton '61



Taft '62

With some light at the end of the Coronavirus tunnel, we here at *Back In THE BRONX* are happy to report continued activity in the form of our 90-minute Zoom Presentations, “The Bronx: The Way It Was”. Every month, and sometimes more, Steve Samtur hosts his program live on Zoom, which features nearly 500 pictures of The Bronx as we remember it, as well as videos and interviews with famous Bronx celebrities. We have found a silver lining in that, due to the necessity to do these presentations virtually, we can reach Bronxites all over the country...and the world! Of course, we eventually hope to return to local libraries, synagogues, and Bronx clubs around the Tristate area, Florida, etc., but we also plan to continue these online programs for as long as you all continue to enjoy them! For more info, as well as upcoming dates, please check the Events section of our website, [www.backinthebronx.com](http://www.backinthebronx.com)!

The Bronx is the birthplace of hip hop. Now, a new museum is under construction to permanently honor the music genre’s roots. Recently, the City of New York and L&M Development Partners closed on a \$350-million grant and will begin construction on Bronx Point, a mixed-use development coming to the Harlem River waterfront in the South Bronx.



**Hip Hop Museum, currently under construction**

“The Breaks” rapper explained in a statement, “For years, we’ve wanted a permanent home in The Bronx, the birthplace of hip hop, and we are proud to be a part of Bronx Point, which will be one of the great new destinations for the borough. Hip hop grew from a seed that was planted at a house party on Sedgwick Avenue

Under the first phase of the project, Bronx Point will construct 542 permanent affordable housing units. The building will also be the permanent home of the Universal Hip Hop Museum. Hip hop legend Kurtis Blow will serve as chairman emeritus of the museum. He has been one of the initiative’s champions since the idea was first announced.



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# Memories of the Ward Theater

By Richard Berman, ribrib60@hotmail.com

During the '40s, '50s, and '60s, every Bronx neighborhood had its own favorite movie theater. The grandest of all, of course, was the much-heralded **Loew's Paradise**. Much has been written about the **Paradise**, but not much has been written about my own Bronx neighborhood cinema gem: the **Ward Theater**.

Opened in 1927 with 1,865 seats and an immense marquee, the **Ward Theater**, located at **1546 Westchester Avenue**, was testimony to the fact that the neighborhood it served was a busy, bustling, crowded one. The **Ward** was one candy store (now a McDonald's) away from the corner of **Westchester** and **Boynton Avenues**. That was just one block from the **Elder Avenue station** on the IRT **Pelham Bay line**.

The **Ward** was truly a gorgeous building. Curiously, although the building had two stories, the theater did not have a balcony. For a while, the second floor was rented by a reception hall called **The Ward Manor**. In the early '60s, the space was then rented by the **Bronx River YMHA**.

Approaching the **Ward**, I would first encounter an outside, cylinder-shaped, glass-enclosed ticket booth. Some teenagers would approach the booth with bent knees, hoping to be able to buy a children's ticket rather than pay the full adult price of admission. Others would sneak outside-purchased contraband candy in their pants pockets or in their coat sleeves.

With ticket in hand, I would walk up the then-seemingly-immense, sloped lobby to present my ticket to the ticket-taker. For each showing, the **Ward** employed, in addition to the ticket-seller and ticket-taker, two or three concession workers, a matron, and a projectionist. Such a costly endeavor might have contributed to the theater's eventual demise. Today, most movie theaters are ten- to twenty-screen

enterprises with just one projectionist.

The theater had a fire exit on **Boynton Avenue**. Yes, the theater had a "Smoking Section". Can you imagine that today? Opening the fire exit surreptitiously was always a challenge to the mischievous among us who had already been seated. Could we sneak it open so that our friends outside would save the price of admission? A difficult challenge it was indeed. The open door would let in the light of day and the sounds of the street. Either would be enough to alert the matron running to the door, ready to throw out the entering offenders, along with the culprit who opened the door.

Dressed always in white, those matrons (the female version of an usher, with an attitude) were something else. They generated fear in our hearts. Armed only

with a flashlight, they kept law and order in the theater at all times. That was a particularly difficult task during crowded Saturday matinees, when candy would be flying all over during boring moments in a film.

Men took their families to the **Ward** for memorable family nights. Couples went to the **Ward** to "nurture" their relationships, and kids went on Saturdays to see two feature films (sometimes three), five cartoons, a newsreel, coming attractions, and a serial. It was the serials, with their cliff-hanging endings, that had us returning to the theater every Saturday to learn what would happen next. Buster Crabbe, who won an Olympic ring for a swimming event in 1932, went on to become a star in many of those serials, including *Flash Gordon* in 1936, and at least two other serials in the '50s: *Pirates of the High Seas* and *King of the Congo*. Most of the serials of the '50s had either a jungle theme, a western theme, a maritime theme, or a science fiction theme.

By today's customs, the way we went to the movies back then was weird. We just went. No checking



Ward Theater, 1546 Westchester Avenue

# Reminiscing

starting times. No, we just went. More often than not, we entered the theater in the middle of a movie. No problem. We watched it until it ended. Then we saw coming attractions, several cartoons, and perhaps the news. We then watched the second feature from start to finish, and then another round of time-fillers, until the first feature film began again. We then watched it, even though we knew how it would end, and we stayed until the part came on that was familiar to us. Were we nuts, or what?

During my kindergarten and first-grade school years, I was a “poor” eater. That greatly concerned my parents, who were children of the Depression. Dad was born in a *shtetl* in Europe, where many of the inhabitants suffered from “food insecurity”. So of course, mom and dad couldn’t stand to hear their son described by some as a “skinny *malink*”. One of mom’s tricks to fatten me up was to take me to the **Ward Theater**. She would bring a fried egg sandwich in her purse and take me to the **Ward** on Saturday mornings when I was five or six years old. Although I hated eggs, mom believed that eggs were the secret elixir to good health and increased weight. While I was hypnotized by the adventure unfolding on the screen, mom would feed me the sandwich, bit by bit, until I had eaten it in its entirety.

Years later, when I was 12 years old, my mom entrusted me with my then eight-year-old brother Curt and sent the two of us off to the **Ward**. She packed some easily-hidden food, provided ticket money, and off we went. Although we passed the scrutiny of the ticket-seller as well as the ticket-taker, we were not so fortunate with the matron. After we were seated, twenty or so minutes later, she approached us and asked us how old we were. Of course, we were honest with our answers. Upon hearing our responses, she

ordered us up from our seats and out of the theater. Saddened, Curt cried most of the way home, just two blocks away.

Oh, but do I remember the candy treats sold at the confectionary counter! They were always a few cents more than candy store prices. On occasion, and especially during the winter, as I grew older and could attend the theater with my friends or my brother, I would buy a candy bar at the corner candy store and hide it in the sleeve of my coat.



Candies consumed in the **Ward Theater** during my childhood included, among others, Goobers, Raisinets, Crows, Dots, Junior Mints, Jujufruits, and of course, Hershey bars. I would be

remiss if I didn’t mention a favorite of mine that you slammed against the arm of your seat to crack it in many pieces. Of course, I am referring to Bonomo Turkish Taffy. (I recall my parents taking me to sit in the “peanut gallery” to watch the *Howdy Doody Show* live in Manhattan. At the end of the show, Clarabell the Clown gave each kid a Bonomo bar. From 1948 to 1952, Clarabell was played by Bob Keeshan, who went on to later fame as Captain Kangaroo.) Although we all loved candy and popcorn, some kids would stop at **Moisha’s Appetizer Supermarket**, just a block away, to purchase a nickel pickle to take into the theater.

The best eatable treat that the **Ward** sold was Bon Bons. I loved them! This delicacy didn’t come out until the 1950s. If you had them, you wouldn’t forget them. They were little balls of creamy vanilla ice cream enrobed in sweet milk chocolate. They were packaged in 5-inch long boxes that contained five or six of these flavorful nuggets. You had to eat them quickly, before they melted and coated your fingers

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# Paddleball in Kingsbridge

By Peter Deforest, pdeforest@yahoo.com

I am a Bronx boy, having grown up in the **Kingsbridge** neighborhood. It was a place of many parks and adventures, and I was outdoors every possible moment, exploring it on foot and eventually by bicycle, riding around the **Reservoir**, through the parks, and along the shopping streets.

One weekend day, as I was walking by **P.S. 86**, my old elementary school near my apartment on **University Avenue**, in the back of the playground near **Walton High School**, I heard a strange sound. A “pock”, “pock”, “bam”, a high-speed kind of crashing. I saw a bunch of men, standing very close to each other (some young, and some older ones), grouped together near a concrete wall, bashing a small black rubber ball as it whizzed by. There were shouts, people calling out “block”, or “long”, or “killed that one”, dodging each other, bashing the ball, and smack-talking each other.

I was intrigued. I had never really watched this sport before, but it was putting its hooks into me. This was my introduction to the New York original, Paddleball! I started to come by and watch the games, trying to learn the rules. There were singles games, as well as doubles. The singles looked rough, with a lot of running, and it seemed to be for the better players and the younger ones. And there was doubles, where people would choose up sides, many people seeming to know each other, and play as regular teams.

I started going to the small court, with two side-by-side regulation courts. You could see some of the stones in the concrete, and there were occasional cracks and chips (you would take advantage of these in the game, to give you unusual ricochet shots). I never really saw a perfectly-smooth, perfectly-maintained court until a few years later. But this was ours and we loved it.

The first thing I did was head down to **Fordham**

**Road** and shop for a wooden racquet (a plywood paddle with holes drilled into it) and some (what were then sold as) handballs: small, highly-pressurized black rubber balls that flew as fast as 90 miles an hour when you hit them. After school, I would walk (well, probably run) down to the court, which was just a couple of blocks from my house, and practice. Serving, volleying, etc. Then someone would come by and play with me, teaching me the rules and how bad I was.

There was a strange old man who I played with for years; he told us his last name, which I can’t recall anymore, and we always called him Mister. I say “strange” because he was

always (and I mean *always*) dressed in a black working-type suit, white work shirt, leather dress shoes, and a black fedora while playing. He had to have been in his early- or mid-50s, because he had been in WWII (he told me a bit about being at the Battle of Tarawa in the Pacific). He was a surprisingly good player, agile, and very accurate with deadly shots. Maybe he was on disability or some kind of veteran’s income, because he seemed to have a lot of free time, and he was well-known there, playing or *kibbitzing*. These days, a 50-year-old man playing sports with teens during the weekdays might raise some eyebrows, but back then it was no big deal. He had a sharp tongue and a sarcastic wit, and made up funny, insulting nicknames for people. Yeah, that was another thing. Until you really got to be known and accepted with this band of strangers, it was mostly nicknames.

There were different crowds and groups to join. There was the weekday after-school crowd, mostly young, like me, and the older weekend crowds. I was the youngest on the weekends, when it was all men in their late 20s to 30s and up. Sometimes, a few geezers in their 50s would show up. They would have all



**Modell's, Fordham Road**

# Reminiscing

the best equipment: fancy paddles with metal edges, headbands, matching wristbands, fancy Cons (the handball “hightop” models were the best). I learned that the best equipment didn’t always mean the best player; sometimes the opposite.

You would practice and practice, hoping to be invited to play in the doubles games, which were taken pretty seriously. The strongest player would be on the left side, where most of the serves and volleys would come, and people like me, the “junior partner”, would play on the right, backing up shots and trying to get a good position. And you would meet people, *all* kinds of people. We would all get along, mostly (more about that later), joking and teasing and having fun, trying to make the best kill shots and have the best volleys.

It was great exercise and you quickly made friends. There was Morrie, the older IRS agent (who everyone was terrified of because of his job, but who was one of the kindest men I knew); Mister (in the black suit), who I already described; Bill, an early-30s insurance executive, who had grown up in the neighborhood but now lived in Queens (the traitor!) and drove all the way from Forest Hills to play all weekend long; and Laura, a lovely young girl, a little older than me (more about her in a minute).

As I said, we all got to know each other and had fun. I turned an amazing shade of dark brown during the summer, had lots of energy, and developed good reflexes and balance. We were always scrupulously honest, never cheating on keeping score, or calling shots that were out to be in, that kind of thing. While we were competing, having fun was what it was all about: to show off your skills, but to win with your skills. And then repeat: new games, new teams, and more fun. If you deliberately made bad calls or cheated, you were a pariah.

One weekend, there was a guy most of us didn’t really know very well. He only came very rarely. He had to be in his 50s but looked pretty rough. A short, chubby guy, who didn’t move very much, just stood his ground and tried to block you from getting to the ball with his body. He was very competitive, and made a lot of sarcastic comments. He wasn’t very well-liked, because yes, he cheated. Mister had come

up with a not-very-kind nickname for him (but not to his face). Because he was an Israeli immigrant with a thick accent, Mister called him “the Refugee”; yes, not very nice, but we didn’t use it.

We were playing doubles: Me, Morrie, this new guy, and I’m sorry, but I don’t recall the fourth player. A shot went out, but his guy said it was in. Okay,



**Paddleball Racquet**

whatever. Then one of his shots went long, another out; but he said no, it was in. We gave it to him. We didn’t want to argue. It was getting unpleasant. Then he cheated a point on the score. And then again. Finally, a shot of his went wide on the left side (my side), and I called it out. No, he said, it was a winner. So finally, I was tired of it. I said, “Okay look, you win, okay? I don’t want to finish the game,” and I stopped playing. If it was going to be so important for him to win through cheating, then I would let him win and be done with it.

He replied, “No, you keep playing,” to which I responded, “You have shaved points and made bad calls, and I just don’t want to play anymore.” My partner agreed, and even the guy on his side wanted to stop playing. We all had watched him cheating. I wasn’t trying to antagonize anyone; I just was tired of playing someone who

couldn’t win with skill and who decided to cheat (an early life lesson?). So he started shouting and turned purple, but eventually he got the message and left. He seemed incredibly mad that a kid would call him out.

Wow, that was bad, but everyone agreed with me. The games continued, and the fun atmosphere returned. About an hour later, a young man in his mid-20s, tall, athletic, and powerfully-built, walked up. “Which one of you is Peter?” he asked, calling my name. Uh oh. He looked angry and possibly violent. I identified myself, and he started walking aggressively towards me. “You disrespected my father. I’m going to kick your ass.” Oh man. I still had my paddle in my hand. I thought, I could hit him with the edge, and it would do damage. But I didn’t want to hurt anyone. So I just froze. We all froze. My friends couldn’t believe it. He had about 8-10 years, 30 pounds, and a foot in height on me. He hit me and knocked me to the ground, tearing my shirt on the chain-link fence, about to start wailing on my face.

All of a sudden, like an avenging Hellcat, the

*continued on page 10*

# A Bronx Kind of Innocence

By Marion Sternberg Pollack, marionpol@verizon.net

The struggle of the past year, the explosion of social media, and the complexity of our world conjures up nostalgia for a simpler time. My thoughts turn to growing up in The Bronx.

I'm back in **Parkchester**, to me the most beautiful place on Earth. I don't learn that people live in single-family dwellings until I go to college. For me, it's all granite and tall buildings, yet **Parkchester** is different. It's a place where a "Parkie" is a cop who carries only a flashlight, where "quad" is a quadrant which divides **Parkchester** into four sections. The "**Oval**" is a lovely wooded park with a large pool of goldfish and art deco fountains spouting water.

As children, we delight in playing for hours with our pink Spaldeens, everything from "A My Name" to punch ball with the boys. When our Spaldeen wears out, we walk with our friends to the candy store next to the shoemaker to buy a new one. We ride our bikes, roller-skate, play potsy, and jump rope (my favorite). We only go home at the end of the day, hungry for dinner. Parents are never worried about our safety. In winter, the snow plows come and create magical mountains in the parking lot. We climb up and slide down all day until we are frozen enough to go upstairs and take a break.

At twelve years old, a budding adolescent, I enter a strange, exciting new world. My friends and I are curious about everything. We have begun to break from the yoke of adult protection. We want to hang out in houses free of parental lurking, where we can be free to be bad. A place to play kissing games.

Mostly, we play spin-the-bottle. We use a classic Coke bottle and spin in hopes of getting someone good to kiss. There are usually seven or eight boys and girls, none of whom I'm anxious to kiss, but I

need the experience. Mitch Michaels is chubby with curly black hair. He has puffy dry lips, not unpleasant to kiss. Mike Smith is cute with a British accent. His kiss is wet, which forces me to wipe my mouth on the back of my hand.

One day, Mike asks me to go to the movies. I accept with trepidation. In the darkened theater, he is holding my hand. I hate it. After an hour of torture, he says, "Boy, we both have such sweaty palms, don't we?"

"Yes, we do!"

He releases his grip and we both contentedly watch the movie.

Back to spin-the-bottle: Two of my good friends play at these sessions. They are Toby Z and Betty Cotton. What is unexpected is that Betty is in love with Toby and

always tries to spin to her. Betty dresses like a boy, talks tough, and loves girls. When she can't hang out with Toby, I become her second choice. She is so much fun, so caring and generous, and a talented kisser. Unfortunately, Betty has to keep her sexual preference hidden. There is little tolerance for who she is in the early '50s.

At the same time, we kids are already taking the bus to **Pelham Parkway** and transfer to the **Bronx Zoo** bus. We spend the entire day at the zoo. There are no killers, muggers, or pedophiles, only the occasional dirty old man who might expose himself. For that, we scream like hell and run like mad. After all, we are thirteen years old and experienced in the ways of The Bronx world.

Another time, we take the same bus to the **Fordham Roller Rink**. We carry our boldly-colored metal skate boxes and wear our little skating skirts, fingertip length.

We branch out to subway travel. Still a pre-teen,



East 177th Street Station